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ABSTRACT

Questionnaire surveys of university faculty and students were employed to assess the writing needs of undergraduates in the life and social science divisions of the University of California, Los Angeles. Findings were to aid the UCLA Department of English in developing a new freshman composition program, based on specific skill deficiencies. Findings from both surveys were independently analyzed and cross-tabulated by division. Ratings of students' writing deficiencies were highly uniform, although significant differences between divisions were found for several categories of writing tasks. The procedures appear to be a feasible strategy for the development of service-oriented academic programs within institutions of higher learning. (Author/KS)

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APPLYING EMPIRICAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES TO
UNIVERSITY-LEVEL INSTRUCTION IN COMPOSITION

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Educators traditionally have justified their choice of curricular goals on the basis of educational "need"--a term which over the years has been loosely and variously defined. Recently, though, a conception of educational need has been advanced (Hoepfner, Bradley, Klein & Alkin, 1972; Klein, Hoepfner, Bradley, Woolley, Dyer & Strickland, 1971) that focuses on the learner, with an educational need defined as a deficiency in the learner's repertoire that can be altered through instruction. Such a view of educational need has engendered a technology of curriculum emerging under the title of educational "needs assessment," and which is briefly defined by Baker (1972) as "..... the appraisal of the operation of a system to determine what program goals should be."

Collectively, goal selection strategies that focus on learner needs constitute more of a model than a set of prescribed procedures. Ultimately, though, the purpose of conducting a needs assessment is to identify those learner needs most worthy of receiving instructional time and resources. To identify high priority needs, most assessment strategies include some provision for consulting with groups who have a stake in the program being developed, usually by way of social science data gathering techniques. Needs assessment strategies thus mark a shift away from traditional methods of establishing curricular goals that depend solely upon the judgments of teachers, administrators, or subject-matter specialists.

This paper describes essential features of the needs assessment strategy implemented for the Department of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. The assessment constituted the initial phase in the development of a proposed first-year, "freshman," composition program designed specifically

for undergraduates in the life science and social science divisions of UCLA. The intent of the study was, first, to determine whether a "campus-wide" need for specialized writing instruction did in fact exist and, second, to provide the English Department with a reasonably reliable data base for making curricular decisions.

Contrasting approaches to curriculum development. Instruction in writing has been, of course, a problematic venture for teachers at all levels of education. That the development of composition programs for university and college students presents some very special difficulties is also true. Much of this difficulty can be attributed to varying interpretations of the role of freshman composition programs within the total collegiate curriculum.

Debate over the role of freshman English typically centers on the extent to which the program should be "liberal" or "practical" in nature. (Kitzhaber, 1963). Advocates of the former point of view have argued that freshman composition is an integral part of an English department's curriculum and therefore need only reflect the professional and scholarly views of its instructors and of the discipline of English in general. In contrast, those who have adopted the "practical" (or service concept) standpoint have suggested that the course ".....should serve the community as a whole by instructing students in techniques of composition they may use whenever they are called upon to write (Wilcox, 1972)."

The distinction between the "liberal" and "practical" points of view is not simply theoretical. These rival conceptions of the role of freshman composition engender two different approaches to curriculum development. If

freshman composition is offered in the "liberal" tradition, then the formulation of defensible goals legitimately falls within the domain of the sponsoring English Department. Course content, materials, and assignments can be developed and justified solely by persons within the field of English.

If, on the other hand, freshman composition is offered as a "practical," or service, course then program developers are necessarily compelled to consider conventions and requirements beyond those imposed by their own subject-matter discipline. In short, they are obliged to determine the needs and expectations of those specific groups which the program is intended to serve. It was in an effort to identify such needs that the systematic assessment of UCLA undergraduates' writing was undertaken.

Information requirements. Clearly, the design of any needs assessment study should depend upon the purposes for which the data will be used. Thus, procedures for the English Department study were to provide information on the writing needs of the target population of undergraduates. In particular, findings were to answer the following questions articulated by the program developers: In what areas of writing competency are students in the life and social science divisions most in need of instruction? Can students in the two divisions be differentiated in terms of the types of writing assignments and tasks required of them? with regard to major areas of writing deficiency?

It should be noted that the scope of the assessment was not to include the systematic analysis of actual performance data, e.g., students' writing samples; such data routinely are collected for all students enrolled in any of the freshman composition courses offered at UCLA. Instead, the assessment

was to provide descriptive information on the instructional priorities expressed by students and faculty within specific academic disciplines at UCLA.

Methods. A survey methodology was employed consisting of pilot study interviews with selected faculty members in the life and social science divisions, followed by questionnaire surveys of faculty and students, respectively. The academic departments comprising the two science divisions of concern in the study are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Academic Department and Divisions Included
in the Needs Assessment Plan

DIVISIONS:	Social Science	Life Science
Departments:	Anthropology	Bacteriology
	Economics	Biology
	Geography	Kinesiology
	History	Psychology
	Political Science	
	Sociology	

The pilot interviews with selected faculty in the two divisions represented the initial data gathering effort and, as such, were exploratory in nature. The intent of the interviews was to solicit faculty members' observations on the quality of their students' written work, and particularly to isolate salient writing problems. An additional purpose was to gain data about the nature and scope of the writing required of students in life and

social science courses. To augment interview data, examples of student work, course syllabi, examinations, and assignment sheets were collected.

On the basis of pilot study findings, and with assistance from the Department of English, four major areas of deficiency in students' written expression were isolated: use of language; provision of evidence and support; development of ideas, and; use of writing mechanics. For each category, operational statements of specific writing competencies were generated. Also identified were writing "tasks," (e.g., "explaining procedures or methods," "reviewing books and articles") typically performed in the two science divisions. From these preliminary analyses, items for the two survey instruments were developed.

A questionnaire survey for faculty members was generated and distributed to all full-time faculty within the two science divisions. Specifically, the assessment instrument was designed to solicit faculty observations in three areas: (1) the proportion of students' papers exhibiting each of fourteen compositional deficiencies (e.g., "imprecise or inappropriate language," "sources not properly documented"); (2) the relative importance of eight categories of writing tasks (e.g., "explaining procedures or methods," "reviewing books and articles") for written work undertaken in undergraduate courses, and; (3) the types of written assignments (e.g., laboratory and field reports, term papers, essay examinations) required in undergraduate courses taught by the respondents. With the exception of two open-ended questions, items on the survey requested faculty to use five-point rating scales for indicating their responses. It was recognized that faculty observations on students' writing would be based on subjective evaluations of undergraduates' competen-

cies as demonstrated on papers and examinations, rather than through immediate reference to actual performance data.

The questionnaire for students, which was mailed to the home addresses of a ten percent random sample of undergraduates enrolled in each of the ten target departments, was designed to solicit observations on writing needs from a student point of view. While the three areas of inquiry included on the instrument paralleled those of the faculty questionnaire, the items were intended to tap each respondent's personal orientation towards writing. For example, students were asked to indicate their own writing strengths and weaknesses, rather than to estimate the proportion of undergraduate papers exhibiting certain deficiencies as did the faculty respondents. Information on the types of writing tasks and assignments performed in course work also was solicited. Students were to record their responses through use of five-point rating scales, though the questionnaire did conclude with several open-ended questions. It was expected that these data would complement findings from the faculty survey by providing a qualitatively different, but important, point of view on the writing needs of students.

Table 2, which presents an excerpt of sample items from the two survey instruments, illustrates how faculty and student questionnaires were similar in content but different in orientation.

TABLE 2

Sample Items from the Faculty and Student
Survey Instruments

Questionnaire for Faculty	Questionnaire for Students
Sample Question: "Please indicate what proportion of your students' papers exhibit each problem."	Sample Question: "How difficult or easy is it for you to do the two following aspects of writing?"
* imprecise or inappropriate language * poor organization of content * sources not properly documented	* choosing the right words to express ideas * organizing the content * providing proper documentation of your sources
1. Faculty rating scale: Nearly All (more than 80%); Most (61-80%); Many (41-60%); Some (21-40%); Few (20% or less). 2. Student rating scale: Very difficult; Difficult; Average; Easy; Very Easy.	

Overview of findings. Due to the differences in item wording and format between the two questionnaire forms, data from the faculty and student surveys were processed separately. Means, standard deviations, and percentages were calculated for all items on each survey. Responses for all items also were cross-tabulated by division (life science and social science).

Analyses of the quantitative data relating to students' writing deficiencies did not reveal systematic differences between the writing problems of life science students and those of social science students. A large concentration of faculty respondents in both divisions did report that many (41-60%) of their students' papers exhibit the writing deficiencies listed on the survey instrument. This evaluation was echoed--quite vociferously in some cases--in the faculty response to an open-ended item requesting further comment on the status of undergraduate writing.

The faculty assessment was more critical than that of the students, who generally indicated that performance of the writing competencies presented on the survey was of "average" difficulty. Interestingly, though, a large proportion of students responded to open-ended items with lengthy and personalized remarks describing the difficulties they experience in meeting university-level writing standards; many students also offered suggestions for restructuring the current freshman composition program.

A high degree of agreement was found between faculty and student respondents from both science divisions concerning the importance of performing certain writing tasks, notably "building a case" or argument for a particular point of view" and "analyzing theories or principles." Analysis of faculty survey results indicated that written assignments in the life science division are more likely to involve "describing an object or process" and "explaining data" than are assignments in the social science division. Findings from the student survey revealed a similar pattern of responses.

Analysis of results regarding required written work showed that, with the exception of the life science emphasis on laboratory or field reports, types of writing assignments were not distributed significantly differently across the two science divisions. Within both life and social science divisions, essay examinations were required by the greatest proportion of faculty, followed by term papers and "short" papers. However, the proportion of faculty respondents within the social science division requiring written work was consistently greater than the proportion of life science respondents.

Findings of the study were summarized and made available to program organizers in the Department of English.

Implications. Within institutions of higher education, faculty members characteristically have been reluctant to adopt the empirical goal setting procedures employed by their counterparts in the primary and secondary schools. This reluctance may be traced, in part, to the fact that most learner-oriented needs assessment strategies have been developed in contexts that bear little relation to and, in fact, often completely overlook the values esteemed in a college or university environment.

In proposing a service-oriented program, however, the UCLA Department of English faced an issue similar to one shared by many decision makers in the primary and secondary schools: how to develop a program directly responsive to the needs of a specific group of learners. Perhaps, then, the most significant aspect of this study was the applicability of empirical procedures to development of the proposed program. From the response to the surveys, it appears that university faculty will respond thoughtfully to matters beyond their own subject-matter discipline when the activity at hand promises to realize substantive and meaningful changes in their students' capabilities. Similarly, it appears that student opinion represents an important source of assessment data when they are provided with an opportunity to express personalized academic needs.

On a less lofty plane, the tangible benefit of the study was to validate the need for specialized instruction in writing on the UCLA campus. Teachers of freshman composition, of course, continue to face the complex intellectual and pedagogical problem of creating an instructional sequence that will, with a relatively high degree of reliability, improve the writing skills of their students. Nonetheless, the needs assessment served both as a source of moti-

vation for developers of the new program and as a data base on which curricular decisions could be made.

With the growing demand for academic programs directly responsive to student needs and the call for leadership from the academic ranks for responsible curriculum planning, the needs assessment effort described in this paper can be viewed as a demonstration of what is possible--for university-level composition programs and, perhaps most important, for other academic programs in institutions of higher education. As Sanford (1962) urged, "Colleges will change only when more knowledge of what they can do and of what they might do has been produced and made available."

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